DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 256 155 FL 014 959

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TITLE Using REAL English: Writing a Dialogue Journal.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 24p.; Based on a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (17th, Toronto, Ontario, March 15-20, 1983).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *Dialogs (Language); *Diaries; *English (Second Language); Individualized Instruction; *Second Language Instruction; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing Exercises; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Dialogue Journals

ABSTRACT

Dialogue journal writing offers students of English as a second language (ESL) authentic, natural communication practice in the classroom. It is an interactive, self-generative, cumulative and functional writing/reading exchange between student and teacher, and is being used successfully in many kinds of ESL classrooms, with all age groups, and with all levels of English proficiency. Benefits to students are that: (1) it helps to remove barriers between teachers and students and equalizes their roles as seekers and providers of information; (2) students practice writing in a natural, conversational style; (3) it is a versatile in-class warm-up activity; (4) it provides the student with individual attention in a non-threatening context, free from correction and grading; (5) it provides an audience for the students; and (6) the interaction involves both reading and writing. Pedagogical, professional, and personal benefits also accrue to teachers: the journal can be used as a diagnostic tool; it provides feedback about the lessons to the teacher; it provides a bridge between students and the culture; and teachers learn from and about the students and their cultures. Research is in progress on the changes in grammatical structures in the course of a journal, acquisition of the ability to accomplish speech acts as manifested in journal entries, and the topics chosen by students in a university ESL program. Although the journal-writing program can be organized many ways, relaxed, simplified responses and efforts to draw out the students are often most successful. (MSE)

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# Using REAL English: Writing a Dialogue Journal[1]

[1]This paper is based on the workshop "Personalizing English Instruction through Dialogue Journals" presented at the Seventeenth Annual TESOL Convention, in Toronto, Canada, March 15-20, 1983.

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Dialogue journal writing offers ESL students authentic, natural communication practice in the classroom. A dialogue journal is an interactive, self-generated, cumulative and functional writing/reading exchange between teacher and student. Dialogue journals are being used successfully in many kinds of ESL classrooms, with all age groups and with students at all levels of English proficiency.

The major benefits claimed for this writing are that it provides an excellent opportunity for students to both receive comprehensible input and to practice language production in a communicative context, and it affords the teacher, through the dialogue journal itself, the opportunity to personalize and individualize language instruction.

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This paper presents a five-part overview and introduction to dialogue journal writing. The characteristics of this writing are explained; student and teacher benefits of dialogue journal writing are described; and a review of current research on the dialogue journals of ESL students is presented. The paper concludes with a set of guidelines for starting and maintaining dialogue journals with an ESL class.

Dialogue journal writing offers ESL students authentic, natural communication practice in the classroom. A 'dialogue journal' is a written exchange between a classroom teacher and each student in the class. On a regular basis, the students write for a previously established period of time in a bound notebook. The teacher takes the notebooks, writes back to each student, and returns the notebooks at a later time. No correction or evaluation of writing takes place. This activity, an ongoing 'written conversation,' continues throughout the entire academic term. The four-turn exchange shown below, between an adult Japanese student and his teacher, gives an idea of the kind of interaction that occurs.

Day 1

Student: I born Tokyo Japan[2]

[2]This exchange is taken verbatim from the dialogue journal. To preserve the original form, errors in spelling and punctuation have not been corrected. All journal excerpts in this article are used with written permission of the students.

My family is seven: father, mother, two brothers and two sisters.

I want to speak English well.

My hobbi is music.

I like to play american football.

I was played American football still high school.

Does Miss G. like American Football?

I want to play it to U.T.M.

Teacher: Sometimes I like to watch football on television. It is a very dangerous sport, so I am afraid! Our teams play football in the autumn (September, October, November). I don't know if you will be able to play football here. I'll ask.

What is your favorite kind of music?

Day 2

Student: Football is a very dangerous sports, there is no doubt about it.

But player doesn't think it.

Japanese play football spring and autumn.

I like American new music. Specially I like Blondy.

Do you know her?

Does Miss G. like kind of music?

Our baseball team was defeated yesterday. Regrettable!

Thanks you cheer girl's Miss G.

Teacher: I like some of the music of Blondie, but not all of it. I like music with a nice melody. Actually, my favorite kind of music is classical--guitar, piano and violin.

Maybe our team will win the next game. I enjoyed being a cheerleader.

This example illustrates the kind of interaction that occurs in a dialogue journal. Since students write first, they introduce most of the topics. The teacher responds, often commenting on the students' topics, but is free to introduce others. Some topics are dropped after one mention (here, there is only one reference to the student's family), and some are continued for several interactions (here, music and football). The interaction is written, but has many of the qualities of oral conversation. This private, ongoing interaction gives the student an opportunity to practice the language free from criticism and affords the teacher the opportunity to model the language in the course of the interaction, and thus to individualize language instruction.

In this paper we will describe the characteristics of dialogue journal writing, discuss the benefits of this writing for both students and teachers, report on current research related to dialogue journal writing, and offer some guidelines for starting and maintaining dialogue journals with ESL students.

Characteristics of dialogue journal writing.

There are five basic characteristics of dialogue journal writing which differentiate it from other kinds of writing. Namely, it is self-generated, interactive, cumulative, conversational and functional (Staton, et al, 1982). The writing is self-generated in that topics are not imposed by the teacher. Instead, both students and teacher have freedom to select topics and to determine how much to write about each topic. Students write because they have something to say, and they

choose topics because of the importance and relevance of these subjects to their lives.

The second characteristic is that dialogue journal writing is interactive in the same way as is a conversation between friends. The two participants maintain a balanced communication in which they both have equal roles. This balance is not always immediately perceived by the student, as seen in the example given earlier, where the student uses a more formal form of address: "Does Miss G. like American football?", but the balance is achieved eventually. In the case cited above, the student, within days, was using the more appropriate question form, "Do you...?"

Dialogue journal writing is cumulative over time. The fact that the interaction continues regularly throughout the term allows the writers to build rapport, as the student becomes comfortable with the language. It also allows the writers to continue writing about the same topic for an extended time period if they so desire. The following series of entries exemplifies the continuation of one topic during several exchanges. Many other topics are being written about at the same time during these exchanges, but we have excerpted the continued one, a proposed meeting at the local pizza parlor.

Teacher: I'm sorry I let you down again about going for pizza. I don't like to do that but today was very very busy and I really was pressed for time. I could probably go tonight or on the weekend sometime. What do you think?

Student: I don't like to go to the pizza house tonight because I have an engineering class and I went there last night.

There is no need for you to go by constraint. We'll go on the weekend sometime when you are free.

Teacher: Kazuhiro, I don't feel obligated to go--not at all! I enjoy your company, both in class and outside!! What I am sorry about is that I promised to do something (to go last night) and then I had to cancel. I don't like to do that. So I want to go, and very much at that. Is Thursday a good night?

Student: OK. Thursday is good.

Yesterday I studyed homework with my friends who are in the other class. Their homework is difficult....Nobody helped me after finishing their homework, and they brought me to the pizza house. I go there everyday recently.

Teacher: You did the homework very well all by yourself! Why didn't they help you?

With all that pizza you're eating, you'd better exercise a lot or you'll get fat. (only kidding)

Student: I didn't go to the pizza house yesterday. So I won't get fat because I play sports every day.

Teacher: (makes no comment on the pizza house)

Student: I went to the pizza house with Sally last night. (I don't know her last name.) I had a good time.

Teacher: Going to the pizza house was a lot of fun. I ate a whole small pizza! But I was very hungry. Soon I'll be Miss Pizza-Belly! (I hope not--I don't want to gain back

the weight I lost!) Let's go again sometime. I'll invite you!

Student: I was very happy yesterday. We won the volleyball game, and I went to the pizza house with you. I was surprised that you ate a whole small pizza. Will you please try to eat a large pizza by yourself next time?

Teacher: I enjoyed going to the pizza house. I can't eat a large pizza by myself! Impossible!

The above example, which covers six interactions in the journal, illustrates one way in which one topic, a potential misunderstanding, is dealt with. The development and elaboration of the topic that we see here is only possible because the writing occurs over a period of time. During this time, the writers to have the opportunity to express their feelings, their sense of uneasiness and displeasure, and even to share a few lighthearted jokes.

The fourth quality is that dialogue journals are conversational in nature, more closely resembling oral language than written, essay-type language (cf. Staton, 1982). As in conversation, a variety of topics, drawn from both school situations and personal concerns, are introduced, dropped, and re-introduced by both writers. Topics change and develop along with external life circumstances.

Finally, dialogue journal writing is functional in nature. The writers use language to accomplish a variety of goals. The journals contain a wide range of language functions, or speech acts--requests for information and action, opinions, promises, offers, compliments, complaints and evaluations, to name a few of the functions found in dialogue journal writing (cf. Shuy, 1982).

Student Benefits

Dialogue journal writing provides many benefits for students.[3]

[3] Our discussion in this section is based on feedback from our students and from our own observations. The quotations are from taped interviews and written evaluations collected from intermediate ESL students at the University of Tennessee at Martin.

First, dialogue journal writing helps to break down the barriers between teachers and students and equalizes their roles as seekers and providers of information. Students carry with them to the classroom a set of expectations and assumptions about how a language class should be managed and about the type of relationship that teachers and students should have. Students often view teachers as givers of information and themselves as receivers and processors of that information. In contrast, some ESL teachers see this sharp division of roles as an obstacle to language learning. In the journal, teacher and student alike communicate in very personal ways, and so each acquires a sense of the humanness of the other person and a sensitivity toward that person. In an interview about benefits, one student said:

> ...(the journal writing) is important because I know you. I learn one person I never saw before. It's not the same I talk to you like a teacher. We are in the classroom, okay, but when I write in the journal it's different. You are not a teacher and I'm your student. You are Henry. I am Juana.

A second benefit of dialogue journal writing is that the students get practice writing in a natural, conversational style. Too often students believe that all their writing must sound formal. Instead of expressing themselves as simply and clearly as possible, as they might in conversation they get lost in an attempt to write in a style which is linguistically beyond their capacity.

A third benefit is that journal writing is a versatile in-class warm-up activity. It is sometimes difficult for students to go into a class and immediately begin to participate in the activity the teacher has planned for that hour. However, unlike lecture classes, ESL classes depend on active student participation for their success. Spending ten or twelve minutes reading, writing, and, most importantly, thinking in English is a good way to get the linguistic wheels turning. One student referred to the journal writing time in this way:

> It's like when you go to a restaurant and you take first a little aperitif. Or before you do sports and you do (blows into her hands) I am hot now. I can begin.

Similarly, journal writing can be used equally effectively as a cool-down exercise. At the end of a class period, students may be more able to synthesize the language skills that they have been practicing.

Fourth, dialogue journal writing provides the student with individual attention from the teacher in a non-threatening atmosphere, free from correction and grades. Because of class size, it is not always possible for teachers to give students this kind of attention. Foreign students are simultaneously adjusting to a strange new culture and struggling with a new language. Through the journal, however, they know

that someone is listening to them, that someone wants to share their ideas, feelings, successes and frustrations, and that someone cares about them as people, not just as students. When the students open up, the teacher has the opportunity to be supportive and encouraging.

A fifth benefit of the dialogue journal is that it provides an audience for the students. Unlike the traditional personal journal, in a dialogue journal students are writing to someone, and thus develop a sense of audience, which many teachers agree is essential to all good writing. The students are no longer pretending to be writers; they are real writers with a real audience. The teacher, responding in the dialogue journal, takes an active role, commenting on the students' ideas and sharing his or her own ideas, experiences and feelings. The teacher can agree, disagree, request elaboration or ask for clarification. One student wrote that he enjoyed reading the teacher's responses because, "I know that you thought about what I wrote when I wrote something." Another wrote, "It's good to know that you can understand me."

As the students communicate conversationally and build rapport with the teacher, they develop confidence in their ability to think and reason and to express themselves in writing. They discover that they can actually communicate their ideas on paper in English. One student said:

> I could see that I can write English. I didn't think that myself could write in English. I could see that I know how to say things and that I know how to ask and how to say the right way.

Another quite introverted student simply wrote, "I confident myself."

The final benefit stems from the fact that the interaction involves reading as well as writing. The teacher is generally responding to topics the students are interested in, so is an effective model for thinking and reasoning processes, writing style, and even vocabulary and spelling. Thus, students tend to improve word order and develop a sense of English rhetoric as they read and respond to the teacher's contributions. A number of students reported feeling that they had improved their writing because of the journal writing. One student remarked:

> I know that I improved a lot and if you give me a paper and say, "write something," I will know how to do it. I know that I was learning, but I didn't know why. I couldn't tell you, "I'm improving here." It's something strange. It's like to talk. I can talk better now than when I arrived here and I can't tell you how I improved in this point. I just can see that I'm improving but I can't tell you in this day in this hour with this person I learned this thing.

When the students get their journals back, what they read is generally a response to a topic they themselves have introduced. The context is clear and the topic is usually of some personal importance to them. We believe that it is in this linguistic setting that new language input is most easily assimilated.

Teacher Benefits

It is natural to speak of benefits for students when discussing teaching techniques and methods, but we do not often hear about the benefits for the teacher. The benefits that we have found in using

dialogue journals with our students can be divided into pedagogical, professional and personal benefits.

The first benefit is pedagogical. We often give our students specific exercises, homework and quizzes to determine their mastery of parts of the language. Often what we find out is what students have "learned" but not what they have "acquired." In such assignments students are monitoring themselves and focusing on the form as much as, if not more than, on the content. In dialogue journal writing students become involved in the message they are trying to convey. We have observed that in the journals, students rarely change or cross out anything they have written. Therefore, the journals give a very clear idea of what the students have really mastered of the language. The teacher can use the journals, therefore, as a diagnostic tool to determine students' ability in grammar and spelling, the scope of their vocabulary and their degree of fluency.

Also, the students can provide the teacher with invaluable feedback about the lessons. Students sometimes mention a classroom activity that they particularly liked or that they found confusing or unproductive. Based on these comments the teacher can restructure lessons based both on a diagnosis of language proficiency and student comments in the journals.

The second benefit is a professional one. We ESL teachers have a unique role in the lives of our students. We not only serve as teachers of the English language, but also as a bridge for our students between cultures. The dialogue journals provide us with an effective means of developing a close relationship with each one of our students, giving us

the opportunity to answer their questions and to listen to and frequently to help solve their problems.

Since we are not, of course, trained psychologists, we cannot attempt to solve serious student problems and should refer such problems to appropriate individuals. However there are many ways in which we can make the transition to life in a new culture easier and more pleasant. We can make a difference in the lives of our students because of our multicultural experience and cultural sensitivity. The journals can make us aware of ways in which we can be more effective ESL professionals. Dialogue journal writing makes students feel better about themselves and this is reflected in their attitude toward their teachers and the course. They seem to realize that a teacher who will spend so much time with students individually must be genuinely interested in them as real people and they appreciate this interest.

As far as personal benefits are concerned, one of the most important is the cultural information that teachers learn through dialogue journal writing. Students tend to write about themselves, and they enjoy discussing their own cultures. When asked what major benefit she had received from writing in the journals, Leslee Reed, the original dialogue journal teacher said:[4]

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[4]This excerpt was taken from a personal interview between Leslee Reed and Jana Staton in September of 1981.

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> Oh I'm learning, I'm learning, I'm learning. Especially with so many cultures, there's such richness. I'm learning every day about little nuances of social behavior and customs and cultures. I don't think I've ever grown so much in my

life as I have this year in understanding the problems of different cultures, different races, trying to fit into this pattern of American life. I've always been fascinated with and loved other cultures but I think I learned to love and respect them more.

Through dialogue journals we have learned a great deal--about our students, their abilities, their concerns and cultures, about student-teacher interaction, about language acquisition--and about ourselves. Our experience confirms Mrs. Reed's feeling that dialogue journal writing is one of the most effective anti-teacher burnout devices ever found!

Research in Progress

Thus far our evidence of the personal and linguistic benefits of dialogue journal writing comes from observations of teachers and students. Current research, however, both documents initial perceptions about the nature of the writing and lends support to our observations that dialogue journal writing facilitates language acquisition.

The following example from Kreeft's study (in progress) shows the change in grammatical structures that occurs in the journal of Andy, a sixth grader from Korea.

Oct 7 We couldnt sock the ball out of the diamond
I changed classes i am en roon 11.

Oct 9 today is no good day becus I cant spec
ingglsh so i can tulk but p.e
time was so fun

Nov 12 today in the morning is stair is fall

tuesday is man pilgrim make and today
is weman pilgrim make be
interesnt and (ay) pilgrim is school
corridor exhibit me is delighted.
and. me is happy. som pob is every
day be ill tempered khansomne and me
is love no I
som pob is be ill tempered Nevertheless
som pob is my friend and
khansomne is too friend
nevertheless no girl frieno
and today is my watch is be out of order ow w no
w
w
w

Jan 22 Yesterday you not come to school.
I'm feel anxiety.
I'm happy today come to school is you
(Miss Reed)
I'm happy happy.
Yesterday teacher is I don't like.
You first and Mrs. C. better.
Yesterday teacher is too good and you and Mrs. C. is better.
yesterday Miss V. is not lesen to me...

Andy begins the year writing short entries, with few errors. By November, he has become more adventuresome with his writing. He not only reports what has happened at school but tells how he feels about it. He has possibly searched his dictionary for helpful words

(eg. "ill-tempered"). He experiments with expressive forms ("ow no"). At the same time, he is less careful about grammatical form. The formerly correct "I" as subject ("I can't spec ingglsh") is now replaced by "me" ("me is delighted"; "me is happy"). His move to more imaginative writing is accompanied by an increase in errors. However, by January, Andy shows that he is learning to punctuate, and "me" has changed back to "I". These four samples from Andy's journal give just a glimpse of the many things that Andy is learning in the journal about expressing himself in English, in writing.

Gutstein's research documents adult Japanese students' acquisition of the ability to accomplish speech acts -- such as making promises, requesting, apologizing -- in English, as manifested in their dialogue journal writing (see also Gutstein, 1983). Her research also includes an analysis of topic initiation and response in the journals of the same students. Topic and function are two basic components of communicative competence, the ability to know what to say as well as when and how to say it. This research will provide the framework for later studies which will determine the precise impact of dialogue journal writing on the acquisition of communicative competence.

A third study, by Meloni, will determine what topics students in a university EFL program choose to write about in the dialogue journal, with a focus on the topics that relate to their personal concerns. A personal concern is a matter which the student wishes to resolve because it is a source of uncertainty, anxiety, and/or strong interest to him or her personally. For example, this student was concerned about his use of time:

> How to spend the time properly is my biggest problem in this country. Since I have lived in the U.S. for 3 years, I'm still having the difficulty in spending my time each day. Last semester, I and my friend had a schedule of studying. We agreed to study until 2 a.m. every weekday. It sounded good during the first week. But in the second week both of us felt tired and slept early. One of us fell asleep in class. We decided to disregard that schedule and finally, we spent our time unregularly. This semester, we haven't solved that problem yet, and hope somebody to help us.

Meloni's research will also address the question of whether there are differences in topic selection between male and female students, students of different nationalities, and students at different levels of English language proficiency.

Much additional research is needed and will, we hope, be carried out in the near future.

Guidelines for dialogue journal teachers.[5]

[5]The reader interested in further information is urged to consult Jana Staton and Leslee Reed, Dialogue journals: A common sense approach to communication. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, forthcoming.

The final section of this paper provides some guidelines for setting up and maintaining a program of dialogue journal writing with a class of ESL students. These guidelines are meant to be flexible, so that teachers will feel free to adapt and modify them to suit their needs and

circumstances.

Some decisions have to be made before a teacher uses dialogue journals with his or her class. These decisions are how often, for how long and where the students will write in their journals.

How often the journals are used depends on the frequency and length of class meetings. Ideally, students write in their journals every time the class meets; however, the actual circumstances of the class will dictate the frequency. Often teachers with large classes and frequent daily meetings will reduce the number of times per week journals are used. Student proficiency plays a role as well--shorter entries from a class of beginners are more quickly responded to than the lengthier entries of an advanced class. The key to journal writing is regularity; the teacher will want to set up the system so that the students always know when and how long they are expected to write and when they will receive a response.

How long the students write is another factor which depends on time constraints. Many teachers use fifteen to twenty minutes of class time for the activity. Others shorten the time to ten minutes in order to limit the length of student entries and thus shorten the time it takes to respond. Some teachers use journals at the beginning of class as a warmup activity, while others use them at the end of class or before a break so that students can use additional time for writing if they need it.

Where the students write is also a matter of teacher preference. Most of us have found that using class time for this activity is preferable, as it ensures continuity of writing on the part of the students.

While some teachers have had success in allowing the students to write at home, this can cause problems. The students often forget their journals or compose their entries as if they were writing compositions. This, of course, defeats the purpose of the spontaneous, natural writing of the journals. No matter where the students write, it is best to begin in class to establish the pattern, and after a few weeks to institute the change to writing outside of class.

Another decision the teacher must make concerns the journal notebooks that the students will use. A spiral or copybook notebook is best, since pages are easily lost from a looseleaf notebook. It is advisable to show the students the exact notebook desired. If all students have the same size notebook, they are easier for the teacher to carry and store.

How the teacher presents the journal to the students will vary with the class. A general introduction usually suffices, and the teacher is able to refine the concept of dialogue journal writing in his or her written responses to the students. Carol Harmatz often explains the journals to her basic students in the following way:[6]

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[6]This excerpt is taken verbatim from Harmatz' portion of the TESOL presentation on which this article is based.

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> I tell my students, "This notebook is special. It's not for vocabulary, classwork, homework or other exercises. It's different. you will write in this notebook every day and give it to me. I'll read and write in it too, give it back to you and we will continue this back and forth every day. We're going to have a conversation on paper; we'll talk to each other. Do you have a question? Ask

me. Some good news? Tell me. A problem? Maybe I can help. Tell me what's important to you and I'll tell you about myself."

I am always sure to tell my students that I will not correct what they write; I will simply answer them. I'm interested in their ideas, not their grammar and spelling. This journal is a place to relax with the new language. It's private time between student and teacher, and it's confidential.

We have found that answering the journals is one of the most exhilirating parts of our teaching day. However, teachers using journals for the first time might perceive the responding time as a chore. That feeling will disappear as the teacher relaxes with the journals and becomes more comfortable responding to the students. Here are some suggestions that should facilitate the teacher in this writing.

It is important for the teacher to draw the student out in writing. Rarely do we succumb to our natural curiosity about the students, and the journals provide an opportunity for teachers to get to know their students on a much more personal level. To this end, the teacher will want to write as spontaneously and naturally as possible, in a conversational way.

In writing dialogue journals with basic students, we sometimes modify certain aspects of our English, choosing structures and vocabulary that the students will understand. We use words that can be easily looked up in a dictionary, or inferred from context, and often, we offer parenthetical explanations of unfamiliar items. With more advanced students, though, such attention to the level of comprehension is not as necessary. Since all students can understand much more than they can

produce, we attempt to keep the language as natural and spontaneous as possible. We have also found it useful to circulate among the students while they are writing, to answer any questions they might have.

The teacher may feel obligated to answer every student question--this is neither necessary nor advisable. If the teacher prefers not to answer a question, this should be conveyed to the student through the journal. It is also permissible for the teacher not to understand a student entry. The teacher should feel free to ask the student for clarification.

Teachers are often reluctant to share personal information about themselves with their students. We have found that as teachers become more comfortable with journal writing, they discover that this sharing is a natural and appropriate development in the journals and is one of the most rewarding aspects of journal writing. The students appreciate honesty and personal attention and generally respond in kind. This assists in developing a relationship of trust and mutual caring that transfers to other classroom activities.

## Conclusion

We hope that this overview of dialogue journal writing will inspire teachers to utilize this valuable educational resource. We have focused on their use in the ESL classroom, but the journals are very adaptable and are already being used in a variety of educational settings--in foreign language classrooms, with deaf students learning written English, with children and adults with learning disabilities, and in high school composition courses, to name only a few.

Dialogue journal writing is a rich, rewarding personal experience

for both teacher and students which also offers numerous benefits in terms of the students' linguistic development. It affords the students the opportunity to communicate in a non-threatening atmosphere with a caring and supportive teacher. We can think of no better language learning environment than this.

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